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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000197

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/06/2027

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SUBJECT: IS SAAD HARIRI SURRENDERING TO HIZBALLAH'S DEMANDS?

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (S) In 2/6 meetings with the Ambassador, March 14 and GOL figures expressed deep foreboding about a rumored offer that Saudi Arabia and Saad Hariri were on the verge of accepting from Iran, Syria, and Hizballah to solve Lebanon's political crisis. According to rumors, March 14 -- by accepting a 19-11 cabinet split upfront -- would give up the blocking/toppling cabinet minority to the March 8-Aoun opposition in return for a promise that the Special Tribunal for Lebanon would be considered seriously. Ghattas Khoury, traveling with Hariri, confirmed the outlines of a proposed deal but insisted that Hariri has not yet signed on. The Ambassador will meet to compare notes with Saudi Ambassador Abdulaziz Khoja on 2/7 to monitor Saudi views. Separately, President Emile Lahoud has reportedly sent a letter to UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon, dated 2/5, in which Lahoud threatens that, if the tribunal is passed by a Chapter VII resolution, Lebanon will be destroyed. End summary.

CONVINCED THAT SAAD, PRESSURED
BY SAUDI ARABIA, ABOUT TO MAKE A DEAL

12. (S) In separate meetings on 2/6 with the Ambassador, Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh (accompanied by MP Wael Abou-Faour) and Mohamed Chatah, Senior Advisor to Prime Minister Siniora, raised alarm bells about messages they received from Saudi Arabia about the progress of talks regarding Lebanon's political crisis. Separately, Druse Leader Walid Jumblatt called with the same concerns. "Why are any of us here risking our lives if Saad is making these kind of deals?" Hamadeh groused, vowing to leave Lebanon and live in France for several months if Saad accepts this presumed deal. All our interlocutors assumed that Saad was being pressured by Saudi Arabia to make such a deal. "I didn't like the sound of Saad's voice this morning," Jumblatt said; "not at all."

CONCEDING 19-11 CABINET IN RETURN
FOR PROMISE OF TRIBUNAL ACTION

13. (S) While the March 14 fears may not reflect what is really going on, our interlocutors pieced together the following scenario from circumspect telephone conversations with Saad Hariri (calling from Riyadh) and meetings with Saudi Ambassador to Lebanon Abdulaziz Khoja (who will meet

the Ambassador on 2/7). Saad Hariri and the Saudis, our interlocutors claim, are mulling over the following package, presented by Ali Larajani to Prince Bandar:

- PM Siniora retracts the cabinet approval of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon from the Official Gazette, essentially making null and void the earlier cabinet approvals.
- The Siniora cabinet is replaced by a cabinet divided by 19-11.
- At least one of the 11 of the opposition cabinet members will be selected in coordination with Saudi Arabia, in order to ensure a bit of neutrality. But all 11 would have full constitutional rights, meaning voting and resigning.
- A committee is formed to look seriously at the tribunal documents, with a strict three-day deadline to complete its work. The committee would have a positive attitude but would look to introduce amendments to the texts.
- The Parliament will open in an extraordinary session and will take up the tribunal.

HARIRI'S ALLIES
DEEPLY SUSPICIOUS

14. (S) Chatah (saying that he spoke for PM Siniora as well), Hamadeh, Jumblatt, and Abou-Faour all had the same basic concerns: if this is an accurate description of what Saad is considering -- and all believe that it is -- then Saad is willing to trade away the all-important blocking/toppling minority of the cabinet in exchange for a mere promise by the opposition to consider the tribunal. "It's all over for us," Jumblatt said. He claimed that such an exchange gives Syria, Iran, and Hizballah a virtual veto over everything the cabinet does, because the opposition

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would surely use the threat of resignation to control the agenda. Hamadeh and Chatah fretted about all of the details not worked out: since the 19-11 concession is given upfront, who could ensure that the cabinet, now in the sway of the opposition, would ultimately pass the tribunal documents? What tribunal provisions would have to be compromised away? What would ensure that Lahoud would sign them? That Berri would table them before the parliament session? There are too many unknowns, they said; too many areas for tricks.

CHATAH MUSES ON POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS

15. (S) Trying to think about how to improve the deal, Chatah mused about two elements that might make the formula more acceptable. First, if the major steps happened at once -- that is, the tribunal is passed by the Parliament at the same time as the cabinet expands to 19-11 -- then at least the March 14 movement would have reasonable assurances that the tribunal would ultimately be established. Second, if the 11th opposition minister was truly committed not to resign (and thus would prevent the opposition from toppling the cabinet), then March 14 leaders and March 8 leaders could each describe the cabinet differently. March 14 leaders could say that, in terms of resignation, the cabinet was 19-10-1; March 8 leaders could say that, in terms of voting, the cabinet was 19-11. Both would be right.

SAAD HASN'T SAID YES

16. (S) Ghattas Khoury, who is traveling with Hariri, acknowledged to the Ambassador by phone and e-mail the basic outlines of the proposed deal to Saad. He claimed that neither Saad nor Saudi Arabia have yet accepted the deal. Another element, Khoury said, is that Iran has promised Saudi Arabia that February 14 (the anniversary of Rafiq Hariri's 2005 murder) will pass quietly and that, if the deal is accepted, then all parties will remove their tents from downtown Beirut. The Ambassador cautioned Ghattas that Saad

should look closely at the details and beware a trap. Using circumspect language, Ghattas acknowledged that the Iranians had passed this suggested deal to Saad after consultations with Syria.

U.S. TO BE BLAMED FOR FAILURE?

¶7. (S) Abou-Faour warned the Ambassador that the United States, and the Ambassador personally, will probably be blamed if, after further reflection, Saad and the Saudis reject this latest Syrian-Iranian "offer." Just watch, Abou-Faour predicted. On Wednesday, Lebanon's pro-Syrian press will announce that a deal has been struck, trading the 19-11 cabinet split for a promise to work on the tribunal. All the details will be announced in the papers. And then March 14 leaders, if they succeed in keeping Saad on their side, will deny having ever made such a deal. The United States will be blamed for scuttling a deal that would have solved Lebanon's political crisis.

¶8. (S) As for the Arab League initiative, Hamadeh reported that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri revealed to Saudi Ambassador Khoja that Hizballah wants Saudi mediation and will try to turn off Amr Moussa's return. Asked why, Hamadeh said that he presumed the Arab League was being inflexible on the 19-10-1 cabinet formula, which had now become a non-negotiable demand by the March 8-Aoun opposition. (As we are reporting septel, the Arab League envoys also seem to be firm on the need for the tribunal to be established first.)

COMMENT

¶9. (S) Saad Hariri has now been out of the country for over a month. Given the certainty of Syrian bugging devices on March 14 and GOL leaders' phones, communication between Saad and his Lebanese allies is imperfect. If Saad has a plan, he probably cannot reveal it in sufficient detail to appease Jumblatt et al. And, abroad, he does not have access to the kind of blunt advice that Jumblatt, Samir Geagea, and others would give him. Based on our own imperfect knowledge of what is going on, we can say that, if Saad is seriously contemplating such an offer, then he is either naive and

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gullible or ready to throw in the towel (a sentiment with which, at times, we can fully sympathize).

¶10. (S) Given all that we know from multiple channels about Syria's allergy to the tribunal, the proposal in its current form is a barely disguised trick to hand the cabinet control to the opposition, while leaving in place any number of potential roadblocks and delays to tribunal establishment. If the Saudis believe they have assurances that the tribunal will be approved, we'd like to know what those assurances -- that have to encompass cabinet, presidential, and parliamentary action -- will be. Especially as President Emile Lahoud reportedly sent a letter on 2/5 to UNSYG Ban Ki-Moon threatening Lebanon's destruction if the tribunal moves forward under Chapter VII, it is hard to have trust in a March 8-Aoun promise. Syria, Iran, and Hizballah must be thrilled to have a proposal that gives March 14 nothing concrete to be taken, apparently, so seriously. The (presumably) Syrian and Iranian authors of this proposal have already achieved something significant, in raising discord between Jumblatt and Hariri, whose alliance is key to the unity of March 14.

¶11. (S) That said, while March 14 forces have successfully parried the most aggressive March 8-Aoun actions so far, time is not on the side of March 14 and the GOL. The Lebanese public is increasingly weary of the political stalemate, and their understandable desire to get on with their normal lives makes them eager for a solution, almost any solution. We

expect that many of Lebanon's international friends also tire of this situation and do not see why an entire country should be shut down indefinitely and propelled toward sectarian strife over what on the surface appears to be only a marginal difference between a 19-11 and a 19-10-1 cabinet split. The March 8-Aoun forces are probably banking on the fact that a 19-11 cabinet split seems to most people preferable to the civil war that appears increasingly likely in this polarized environment. We hope that the Saudis and others remain firm in their conviction that the tribunal is essential and that Syria, Hizballah, and Iran should not hold a combined veto over all GOL decisions. Given the reported desire by Hizballah that Arab League diplomacy cease in favor of Saudi mediation, we also hope that Amr Moussa will return to Lebanon soon to push again the 19-10-1 cabinet formula linked with tribunal approval.

FELTMAN